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The Role of the Holy Will

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Abstract

It is well known that Kant uses the notion of the holy will in the *Groundwork* so as to contrast it with the finite wills of human beings. It is less clear, however, what function this contrast is supposed to perform. I argue that one role of the holy will is to illustrate transcendental idealism's account of the relation between moral knowledge and moral practice. The position is one intended to negotiate between ostensibly competing traditions. Kant uses the holy will as a way of endorsing the metaphysical picture of the scholastic tradition's so-called 'ethics of freedom', whereby the ideal of moral perfection is conceived as the perfection of one's power of freedom to the point where one is constitutively incapable of immoral action. This position is married however with the claim that the holy will's inaccessibility to human cognition motivates a subject-oriented moral epistemology more usually associated with Enlightenment humanism. I conclude by claiming that the nuanced role for the holy will can be understood as part of an Kant's expansion of the value of religious faith [*Glaube*] to the domain of practical inquiry in general.

I. Introduction

In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant contrasts the finite human will with that of a perfect will, which he refers to as the *holy will*.¹ While it is one thing to acknowledge the presence of the notion of the holy will in the *Groundwork* it is another to identify just what it is doing there. The least charitable response is perhaps Schopenhauer's remark that Kant was in fact 'thinking somewhat of the dear little angels'

and offering a sop to the Christian commitments of his readers.² Hegel's nuanced critique of Kant's 'moral world-view' seems to involve the rejection of the holy will, with the claim that the otherworldliness of such a perfect moral agent ultimately represents an incoherent and contradictory picture. For Hegel, such idealizations represent 'an unconscious, unreal abstraction in which the concept of morality...would be done away with' and that the very idea of a 'purely moral being...has to be given up'.³ More charitable interpretations of the function of the holy will suggest that its role is that of affording an understanding of the relation between the influence of rationality and desire in human beings, through the comparison of us with beings who lack desires.⁴ Others maintain that its function is to assist in the characterization of a good will,⁵ or of illuminating the distinction between categorical and hypothetical imperatives,⁶ or of explicating Kant's own distinct metaethical position.⁷

These contenders are not exclusive, and Kant surely puts the notion of the holy will to some or all of the above functions. I will argue however that the role of the holy will is more nuanced still than some commentators have thought. The function of notion of the holy will, I claim, is to illustrate transcendental idealism as a model of the relation between moral knowledge and moral practice, one that can negotiate between ostensibly competing traditions. On the one hand, Kant uses the holy will as a way of endorsing the scholastic tradition's so-called 'ethics of freedom', whereby the ideal of moral perfection is conceived as a perfection of one's power of freedom to the point where one is constitutively incapable of free choice of immoral action. On the other hand, I argue that transcendental idealism's demand of the holy will's epistemic inaccessibility is directed at accommodating the kind of subject-oriented turn usually associated with Enlightenment humanism.

Kant attempts to use the notion of the holy will both to identify a model of moral perfection to which we might coherently aspire, I claim, while at the same time using that

notion for the purposes of isolating a distinct value that is in contrast only available to imperfect moral agents such as ourselves. The value of moral commitment in the face of the unknowability of the ultimate noumenal grounds of our obligations is something only imperfect and finite cognitive subjects can realize. I will first outline the account of the holy will that Kant presents in the *Groundwork* (§ II).⁸ I'll then before argue that Kant's Critical moral philosophy can be viewed as a qualified development of the scholastic ethics of freedom tradition while also endorsing the Enlightenment focus on the autonomous deliberation of the subject (§III). I then argue (§IV) that putting Kant's moral philosophy in the context of the first *Critique's* project of making room for faith [*Glaube*] illustrates how this mediation between the traditions is supposed to be accommodated by transcendental idealism. I conclude (V) by showing how this mediation is required by Kant's dual demands for a reformulation of metaphysics and a subject-oriented refocusing on the existential demands of human beings' practical lives.⁹

II. The Holy Will

The notion of a holy will is understood in contrast with the particular connotation that Kant has given to the notion of obligation. Kant strategically focuses upon the phenomenology of obligation, i.e. of its felt force within our consciousness. The meaning of obligation, Kant thinks, is generated relative to the particular circumstance of the feeling of constraint, or, in Kant's terminology, 'necessitation' (4: 417). The role of necessitation refers to the phenomenological force or felt bindingness of obligation.¹⁰ Crucially, Kant holds that the essential representational content that characterizes necessitation itself refers to a contrast generated exclusively in the human context. Human beings' nature is such that they must negotiate the pulls of rational constraint

against the pushes of inclination – as such, necessitation is relevant to the ‘determination of the will of a rational being by grounds of reason, to which this will is not, however, according to its nature necessarily obedient’ (4: 413). As Stern puts it ‘imperatives apply to us because we possess contrary inclinations that need to be constrained by reason in its representation of what is good’.¹¹ Obligation is mostly clearly manifested then by a distinct phenomenology whereby it conflicts or contrasts with desire when each points our wills in differing directions. Kant holds that the paradigmatic phenomenon that characterizes moral responsiveness itself is that of obligation and the essential feature of obligation is the awareness generated by the figure/ground contrast of rational necessitation against inclination.

On the other hand, Kant also wants to characterize ethics itself as a body of necessary rules or *laws* – specifically, laws of freedom. The modality of our moral judgment is ultimately characterized as our responsiveness to the laws of morality that impose themselves upon us. Part of the task of sections II and III is that of working the reader round to seeing the plausibility of this initially counterintuitive characterization, by claiming that genuine moral action, if actual, must be the result of practical reasoning by an autonomous agent, and this latter concept requires that the agent be a metaphysically free agent.

The matter is of course notoriously complicated by Kant’s ultimate recourse to transcendental idealism. The metaphysics of transcendental idealism have it that a metaphysical power of free will is, if possible at all, located in the unknowable domain of noumena.¹² The entities (or facts or states of affairs) that would constitute the grounds of the truth of either freedom or determinism are located in a domain distinct from the scientifically tractable phenomenal domain. Thus Kant claims that ‘reason would overstep all its bounds if it undertook to *explain* HOW pure reason can be practical, which would be one and the same task entirely as to explain *how freedom is possible*’ (4: 458).

It would seem unsatisfactory if, in response to our question as to the nature of the grounds of our obligations, we were told in response that ‘that would be a noumenal matter’. Kant holds however that this lack of access to the metaphysical grounds does not undermine our first-order knowledge claims. In the First *Critique* he compares the claims of ethics and mathematics in this regard:

Besides transcendental philosophy, there are two pure sciences of reason, one with merely speculative, the other with practical content: pure mathematics and pure morals. Has it ever been proposed that because of our necessary ignorance of conditions it is uncertain exactly what relation, in rational or irrational numbers, the diameter of a circle bears to its circumference? (A480/B508)

Kant holds that we need not know the metaphysical grounds of our obligations in order to register *that* they are our obligations. He argues that we must nevertheless act ‘under the idea of freedom’ (4: 448), i.e. our conception of ourselves as agents is constrained by a rational demand that we consider ourselves as free in all our practical deliberations.¹³ Moreover, Kant claims – again, not uncontroversially – that the result of this argument is sufficient to secure the corroboration of the moral law and its bindingness upon us.¹⁴

The notion of a holy will is that of a subject who has pure and unfettered access to the laws of freedom, by virtue of its own existence as a being of pure freedom itself. A holy will inhabits only the intellectual world, i.e. the same noumenal domain that the laws of freedom themselves occupy (4: 453).¹⁵ Such a subject lacks embodiment or any capacity to be affected by the desires that might conflict with the stipulations of the laws of freedom. Yet Kant argues though that the very content of the ‘moral must’ is characterized by the possible presence of *necessitation*, and that latter feature requires the presence of desires with which the demand of obligation can at least on occasion

conflict.¹⁶ A holy will, lacking desires as it does, exists in a domain where the conditions under which a sense of necessitation could be apprehended do not obtain. As he puts it, for a holy will then the ‘ought’ is ‘out of place’ – a perfectly good will would by definition be a subject for whom the possibility of deviation from the path of the moral law was eliminated. The consequence though is that the phenomenology of necessitation could not arise for that subject, lacking as it does any imperfect aberrations in its will for it to resist:

Thus a perfectly good will would just as much stand under objective laws (of the good), but it could not be represented as thereby necessitated to actions that conform with laws, because it can of itself, according to its subjective constitution, be determined only by the representation of the good. Therefore no imperatives hold for the *divine* will and generally for a *holy* will: here the *ought* is out of place, because *willing* already of itself necessarily agrees with the law. Therefore imperatives are only formulae to express the relation of objective laws of willing as such to the subjective imperfection of the will of this or that rational being, e.g. of the human will. (4: 414)

Kant repeats the claim in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, in identifying the ‘proper moral condition’ of human beings:

The moral level on which a human being (and, as far as we can see, every rational creature as well) stands is respect for the moral law. The disposition incumbent upon him to have in observing it is to do so from duty, not from voluntary liking nor even from an endeavour he undertakes unbidden, gladly and of his own accord, and his proper moral condition, in which he can always be, is *virtue*, that is, moral disposition

in *conflict*, and not *holiness* in the supposed *possession* of complete *purity* of dispositions of the will. (CPrR, 5:8)¹⁷

For Kant, the thought that the holy will acts virtuously possesses as much sense as the thought that a non-human animal acts wantonly in the pursuit of its desires. The attribution of virtue or wantonness to the holy and non-human animal wills respectively would only be appropriate were either will capable of doing otherwise, yet for neither is this the case.

In the *Analytic of Pure Practical Reason* in the second *Critique*, Kant explicitly identifies holiness of the will as an aspirational ideal on which to model our moral conduct.¹⁸ There he is equally explicit regarding the only way this aspiration is to be formulated, and that ‘the utmost that finite practical reason can effect is to make sure of this unending progress of one’s maxims toward this model and of their constancy in continual progress, that is, virtue’ (5: 32-3). Kant warns however against the ‘dangerous’ assumption that completion of this task is possible. The idea of a holy will can serve as a model only insofar as it can be related to the model of the perfection of the *human* will, i.e. in virtue, and our finite reason being practical ‘without hindrances’ in the sense articulated in the *Groundwork*. It is in this way, and this way only, that human beings can aspire to the analogue of moral perfection that the holy will affords. We ought not to confuse the sincere aspiration to ‘progress’ towards holiness with the dangerous claim of thinking that goal to be realizable. Similarly, we ought not confuse the aspiration to strive endlessly *qua* finite subject towards holiness, i.e. the attempt to perfect our humanity, with the aspiration to transform oneself into a non-finite divine subject.

One of the roles of the holy will is to make evident the fact that it is a type of being that despite (or rather, we are supposed to see, *because of*) its holiness is thereby incapable of representing necessitation. A holy will is incapable of representing its

obligations to itself *as* obligating. Yet this claim is supposed to follow from the fact of its perfection of an epistemic power, i.e. of its pure and unsullied cognitive contact with the laws of freedom. By virtue of its perfect epistemic contact with the metaphysical grounds of morality, the holy will actually manifests what one might have initially thought of as a deficiency with regard to its capacity for one kind of moral responsiveness. As Kant puts it in the second *Critique*, for finite wills, were we somehow to ‘come into possession of *holiness* of will by an accord of will the pure moral law’, then in such a case ‘the law would finally cease to be a command for us, since we could never be tempted to be unfaithful to it’ (CPrR 5:81-2).¹⁹

III. The Ethics of Freedom and Enlightenment Humanism

Kant’s Critical model represents a development of – and to some extents a departure from – a standard scholastic picture concerning the relation between freedom and morality. This picture, originating with Augustine, is committed to what Pink had referred to as an ‘ethics of freedom’, whereby the proper understanding of the relation between our moral behaviour and moral perfection is that of realizing a perfected state of freedom.²⁰ Crucial to this picture is Augustine’s distinction between *libertas minor* and *libertas maior*.²¹ The former indicates the power of free choice that is available to subjects capable of failing to obey morality and thereby falling prey to sin. The latter indicates that perfection of our power of free choice whereby the representation of the good is so evident to the subject that it is constitutionally incapable of freely choosing otherwise. Lombard gives a typical expression to the position in the claim that ‘a choice [*arbitrium*] that is quite unable to sin will be the freer’.²² The progression of human moral perfection involves the aspiration to transform the human *libertas minor* into the *libertas maior* of the

angels, whereby ‘after the confirmation of beatitude there is to be a free will in man by which he will not be able to sin’.²³

Kant’s distinction between the power of human choice and that of the holy will clearly echoes that of the scholastic distinction between the *libertas minor* and *libertas maior*. The theme would have been familiar to him at least from Leibniz’s *New Essays*, where Locke’s representative claims that to ‘be determined by reason to the best is to be the most free’²⁴ and moreover that ‘those superior beings...who enjoy perfect happiness...are more steadily determined in their choice of good than we and yet we have no reason to think they are...less free, than we are’.²⁵ Kant endorses this notion of a holy will as a being of pure freedom, and as such as a being ‘more free’ than finite beings. Thus he also endorses the counterintuitive scholastic claim that there is at least one sense in which a *deficiency* in the ability to do otherwise (i.e. otherwise than non-sinful action) can be coherently understood as a reflection of *superiority* in one’s capacity for free choice.

The reader of the first two sections of the *Groundwork* would then have encountered what would have been a familiar picture of the relevance of rationality and desire to morality. Since respect for the moral law requires attending to the rational side of our nature above the demands of desire, one might reasonably infer that moral perfection consists in the perfection of our epistemic capacities in attending to the rationally revealed laws of freedom. From this the further thought might arise that what we are doing is aspiring to represent those laws as a perfectly rational being might represent them. The goal of moral inquiry is then to aspire to the more angelic rather than animalistic side of our natures.²⁶ It is perhaps in the spirit of this side of Kant’s thought that Duncan claims that for Kant nothing ‘would be lost if God could create us in such a way that we were not prone to doing evil and never chose to flout the moral law’.²⁷

However, while Kant clearly endorses the value of becoming a holy will as a conceptualizable ideal, his endorsement is not without important qualification. When Kant analyzes the meaning of the moral ought in *Groundwork* III he describes it as what a will's rationality would recommend if 'reason were practical in it without hindrances'. He immediately qualifies this characterization though as one which is understood as applying in the context of 'beings who, like us, are also affected by sensibility' (4: 449). Thus our aspiration is to perfect reason's being actually unhindered by our sensibility without departing from the essentially human condition of its *possible* hindrance by sensibility. The aspiration to emulate a holy will's perfection in our human nature ought not to be substituted with an aspiration to transform that nature into something of an entirely different kind. The rational goal of moral practice is to perfect our human rationality without abandoning the constitutive condition of human nature, that of our embodied nature making us subject to desire and inclination.

Secondly, the aspiration to emulate a holy will is formed within the epistemological restrictions demanded by transcendental idealism. Our emulation of such a being could only come about through some cognitive acquaintance with that being. However, since such entities are beings of pure freedom, and as such noumenal beings, then by the lights of transcendental idealism, they are also the kind of beings whose nature and behaviour are in principle non-cognizable. In this way, our emulation of holy wills cannot be secured by way of a hoped-for epistemic contact with them. The emulation of holy wills cannot be hoped for by epistemic means – such as observation or testimony – such as might put us in immediate experiential receipt of practical rules for moral conduct.

This qualified role of the holy will in the *Groundwork* could be seen as providing the motivation for an abandonment of the practical analogue of what Allison refers to as the 'theocentric paradigm' in theoretical philosophy.²⁸ The move is a methodological one,

whereby the very idea of a criterion for knowledge determined by divine standards is rejected. Allison argues that the project of the *Critique of Pure Reason* has to be understood in terms of the task of redefining what it is for an objective knowledge claim to be made in metaphysics. Kant argues for the rejection of a ‘God’s eye point of view’ standard and for the adoption of an anthropocentric conception of objectivity itself. I’d claim that Kant’s strategy in the *Groundwork* is aimed at the rejection of a similarly over-aspirational standard with regard to the task of moral inquiry. Kant wishes to bring the reader to see that a certain model of what it would be to apprehend the fundamental explanatory grounds for our obligations ought to be rejected even as a coherent model of philosophical inquiry.²⁹ This model is the epistemic model of apprehending them automatically by virtue of an entity’s own perfected nature. In the first *Critique* this model was explicated with the notion of an intellectual intuition;³⁰ in the *Groundwork* Kant is recommending the abandonment of the aspiration to grasp the laws of freedom in the same way that a holy will would grasp them.

Many of the familiar sources of humanist influence upon Kant held varying degrees of opposition to the scholastic tradition’s conception of the ethics of freedom. Specifically, the aspiration for metaphysical knowledge of morality as engendering a deleterious effect upon human moral behaviour was a familiar and well-established theme within Kant’s intellectual development. In the Preface to the *Novum Organum*, Bacon had claimed that the source of the Fall was Adam’s desire not for knowledge of nature but rather for the ‘moral knowledge’ that was the preserve of divine beings.³¹ Similarly, Kant would have seen the coherence of the aspiration to angelic status challenged in Montaigne’s well-known conclusion to the *Essays*, whereupon it is claimed that the very aspiration to model one’s own behaviour on a divine standard is inevitably self-undermining:

They want to be besides themselves, want to escape from their humanity. That *is* madness; instead of changing their Form into an angel's, they change it into a beast's; they crash down instead of winding high. These humours soaring to transcendence terrify me as do great unapproachable heights.³²

Montaigne's claim amounts to an ironic inversion of the theocentric paradigm: by having the correspondence of one's will with a divine standard as the proximate goal of moral inquiry, one undermines the very ambition of moral improvement that initially motivated that inquiry. Conversely though, he claims that human beings secure 'an accomplishment, absolute and as it were God-like' when we resist the temptation to 'sally forth outside ourselves' and are thereby also brought *closer* to divinity by virtue of rejecting the ambition of correspondence with divine behaviour as a proximate goal.³³

The most likely source of influence here though is that of Rousseau. Kant's familiarity with Rousseau's *Emile* is routinely noted.³⁴ In particular, Rousseau is credited with influencing Kant to reject the idea that moral responsiveness is a matter of perfecting our cognitive and epistemic powers.³⁵ Less frequently noted though is how much Rousseau's account of the relationship between metaphysics and morality is echoed in both the B preface to the first *Critique* and the *Groundwork*. The 'Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar' that forms Part IV of *Emile* contains themes that survived directly into Kant's Critical philosophy. There the vicar claims several 'articles of faith' as part of his spiritual autobiography, including the existence and benevolence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the reality of freedom.³⁶ Rousseau held that a pure being that might survive after corporeal life has ceased would lack desires and hence only will the good:

Where our perishable needs end, where our senseless desires cease, our passions and our crimes ought also to cease. To what perversity would pure spirits be susceptible? Needing nothing, why would they be wicked? If they are deprived of our coarse senses, and all their happiness is in the contemplation of the beings, they would be able to will only the good...³⁷

However, Rousseau is clear that the aspirations to be rid of our corporeal condition and the aspiration to angelic status are ill-formed, since the value of virtue consists *solely* in the struggle to overcome the interruptions of our desires with the power of a free will. We cannot know for certain, but we may form an understanding that the struggle that defines the possibility of morality is valuable in itself, and merely *hope* of benefit in recognition of that struggle in an afterlife:

Why is my soul subjected to my senses and chained to this body which enslaves it and interferes with it? I know nothing about it. Did I take part in God's decrees? But I can, without temerity, form modest conjectures. I tell myself: "If man's mind had remained free and pure, what merit would he gain from loving and following the order which he saw established and which he would have no interest in troubling? He would be happy, it is true. But his happiness would be lacking the most sublime degree, the glory of virtue and the good witness of oneself. He would only be like the angels, and doubtless the virtuous man will be more than they are. He is united to a mortal body by a bond no less powerful than incomprehensible. The care for this body's preservation incites the soul to relate everything to the body and so gives it an interest contrary to the general order, which the soul is nevertheless capable of seeing and loving. It is then that the good use of the soul's liberty becomes both its merit and its recompense, and that it prepares itself an incorruptible happiness in combating its terrestrial passions and maintaining itself in its first will."³⁸

This passage is replete with Kantian themes. The angelic being could not take ‘good witness of oneself’, i.e. it cannot represent to itself the value of the moral behaviour it engages upon, lacking as it does a first-personal experience of what it would be to fail or succeed in moral struggle. With such an understanding in hand, we finite beings can comprehend that the value of virtue is non-accidentally connected with the unknowability and indeed incomprehensibility of the explanatory grounds of the moral order.³⁹ Moreover, the moral behaviour of imperfect beings is in one respect superior to the behaviour of the more perfect angels. A man’s virtuous behaviour will make him ‘more’ than the angels, and his satisfaction from his merely taking good witness of himself will then attain the ‘most sublime degree’.

Kant maintains the same position in the *Groundwork*. Immediately after having characterized a will ‘whose maxims necessarily harmonize with the laws of autonomy is a holy...will’ (4: 439) and having stipulated that such a being cannot act in accordance with duty, Kant moves in the next paragraph to attribute *sublimity* exclusively to the good will of the *finite* self-legislating subject:

[A]lthough we think of the concept of duty in terms of subjection to the law, yet at the same time we thereby picture a certain sublimity and dignity in the person who fulfils all his duties. For there is indeed no sublimity in him in so far as he is *subject* to the moral law; but there is, insofar with regard to it he is at the same time *legislating* and only because of that subordinated to it. (4: 439-40)

A holy will has no need to self-legislate the moral law but is rather subordinated to it by virtue of being by its nature ‘subject’ to the moral law. For human beings on the other hand, subordination to the moral law, if and when it occurs, is properly conceptualized as

an achievement, one that arises just because we are not by nature always subject to it. Just as for Rousseau, Kant attributes a kind of sublimity to the imperfect finite will that is absent in the perfect holy will just on account of the imperfection of the former.

IV. Moral Glaube

The strategy that I am attributing to Kant is far from being an anti-religious maneuver. I would claim that it is in fact inextricable from his understanding of the similar value relating to religious belief and moral commitment. The relevance of the developed practical theory can be compared with Kant's claim from the first *Critique* that the benefit of denying knowledge of God's existence or non-existence is that it creates a space where the attitude of *faith* may reside and be respected as immune from dogmatic theologian and sceptic alike (Bxxx).⁴⁰ There is little of intrinsic or characteristic value in the state of faith though if it amounted to no more than an expression of an epistemic deficit. A characteristic feature of faith is surely as an expression of one's steadfast commitment to one's belief with the coterminously held belief regarding that epistemic deficit. The blessedness of those with faith depends crucially on their understanding and acceptance of their own epistemic position as hindered. As such, the recognition of epistemic humility is crucial to their understanding of the value of their own religious commitment.⁴¹ Kant's claim that depriving us of knowledge of things in themselves 'makes room for **Faith** [*Glaube*]' (Bxxx) can be understood then as making room for the *value* of faith. One of the strategic purposes of transcendental idealism is without doubt that of insulating the claim of God's existence from possible disproof. Another purpose is that of insulating the issue of God's existence from possible proof. God's existence or non-existence ought not to be a matter of theoretical proof or disproof at all. The

location of the facts with regard to God's possible existence in the noumenal realm affords Kant a theoretical explanation as to why that which ought to be a matter of faith rather than knowledge can in fact only be a matter of faith. Transcendental idealism insulates the question of God's existence from the impiety of the very attempt at proof.

The B-edition of the first *Critique* contains a well-known motto quoted from Bacon's *Novum Organum*.⁴² The quoted passage follows from others where Bacon makes several claims regarding the nature and aspiration of knowledge and belief that are echoed in the B preface, such as the state of dispute in philosophy,⁴³ the importance of determining a proper method,⁴⁴ and the limitation of human cognitive powers.⁴⁵ Moreover, Bacon claims that the benefit of the delimitation of our theoretical capacities is the clarification of the appropriate domain for the attitude of faith:

We also humbly pray that the human may not overshadow the divine, and that from the revelation of the ways of sense and the brighter burning of the natural light, the darkness of unbelief in the face of the mysteries of God may not arise in our hearts. Rather we pray that from a clear understanding, purged of fantasy and vanity, yet subject still to the oracles of God and wholly committed to them, we may give to faith all that belongs to faith.⁴⁶

Kant's claim that the denial of knowledge is the means for protecting the domain of religious faith is clearly inherited from Bacon, yet in that same passage from the B preface, Kant is explicit that morality too requires the same noumenal ignorance required by the religious domain:

[T]he doctrine of morality asserts its place and doctrine of nature its own, which, however, would not have occurred if criticism had not first taught us of our unavoidable ignorance in respect of the things in themselves and limited everything

that we can cognize theoretically to mere appearances. (Bxxxix)

Amongst the concepts whose referents are held to lie in the noumenal realm are not just those of God and immortality, but also that of freedom. The ‘practical use’ or reason in those domains of inquiry relating to those concepts all require that one ‘simultaneously deprive speculative reason of its pretension to extravagant insights’ (Bxxxix-xxx), and for this reason demand that one establish noumenal ignorance. The practical promise of the arguments for noumenal ignorance in the first *Critique* with regard to freedom are only properly explored in the *Groundwork*. The goal is not merely to offer an account of why we cannot cognize the explanatory grounds for our moral obligations (though that is certainly part of the strategy); the goal is also to situate the fact of that ignorance within a context whereby our disadvantaged state in the theoretical sphere can be understood in fact to afford us some advantage in the practical sphere. In particular, we can come to see that our hindered epistemic state makes possible the distinct existential value that we place upon our moral struggles. Noumenal ignorance plays the role of denying knowledge in order to make room for *Glaube* in the moral as well as religious domain.⁴⁷

A well-known passage from the second *Critique* Kant engages in exactly this kind of reasoning when considering the value of our ignorance of God’s existence for moral conduct:

[If] *God and eternity with their awful majesty* would stand unceasingly *before our eyes*....Transgression of the law would indeed be shunned, and the commanded would be performed. But...because the spur to action would in this case always be present and external . . . most actions conforming to the law would be done from fear, few would be done from hope, none from duty, and the moral worth of actions, on which alone in the eyes of supreme wisdom the worth of the person and even that of the world depends, would not exist at all. As long as human nature

remains as it is, human conduct would thus be changed into mere mechanism in which, as in a puppet show, everything would *gesticulate* well but there would be no *life* in the figures. (CPrR 5: 147)

Onora O'Neill comments on this passage as follows:

It would be a religious and moral disaster if *per impossibile* God were the demonstrable God of the rationalist tradition: religion (as Pascal also understood) requires a hidden God. *Deus absconditus* coerces neither belief nor action. Far from it being a misfortune that “no one indeed will be able to boast that he knows that there is a God and a future life” (CPR A828–29/ B856–57), this cognitive limitation is indispensable for uncoerced morality; moreover, it leaves the space in which the question “What may I hope?” can be asked.⁴⁸

O'Neill is surely right that for Kant knowing the metaphysical facts regarding God's existence would be disastrous for morality. For Kant it is the denial of the possibility of answering the theoretical question that ‘makes room for’ or ‘leaves the space’ for even framing a distinctively practical question. I'd claim that for Kant a similar space for the practical relevance of moral deliberation is created by virtue of the epistemological restrictions of transcendental idealism. It is because we cannot know noumena in the way that a holy will can that the question about the explanatory reasons for our obligations is ultimately unanswerable. However, there is a sense in which it is only because we cannot know noumena that moral questions are pressing for us in the distinctive way that they are, i.e. by way of the experience of necessitation and duty. The conditions that constitute our epistemic hinderedness, i.e. our finite receptive natures, are the very same conditions that constitute the possibility of registering respect and developing a moral disposition:

[W]hen, on the other hand, the moral law within us, without promising or threatening anything with certainty, demands of us disinterested respect; and when, finally, this respect alone, become active and ruling, first allows us a view into the realm of the supersensible, though only with weak glances; then there can be a truly moral disposition. (*CPrR*, 5: 147)

With such an understanding we are supposed to gain a new sense of the practical value of the limitation of our theoretical capacities. We gain what Kant called in his essay on theodicy ‘negative wisdom’ – ‘namely, insight into the necessary limitation of what we may presume with respect to that which is too high for us’....(*Theodicy*, 8: 263). Specifically, we grasp that the understanding of why our moral existence is possible (i.e. how freedom and practical reason themselves are possible) would *a fortiori* deny us the capacity to register that which we most value – our capacity to determine our moral values for ourselves. As such, the fact that our epistemic state is hindered becomes *itself* something to be valued:

Thus what the study of nature and of the human being teaches us sufficiently elsewhere may well be true here also: that the inscrutable wisdom by which we exist is not less worthy of veneration in what it has denied us than in what it has granted us. (*CPrR*, 5: 148)

Although we cannot know exactly how and why our hindered epistemic state is as it is, we can speculate as to why: our hindered epistemic state is something that has been *granted* to us, since for the feeling of respect for the moral law to be even registered requires denying that its essential nature can be understood. Thus denying us the possibility of the latter is the necessary condition for our being granted the possibility of

the former.

These are connected elements, and Kant makes different uses of the connection in the second *Critique* and in the *Groundwork*. In the second *Critique*, he imagines that if a finite human being could know God's existence and will then our moral reasoning would be of an instrumental nature, and morality would be transformed into a system of hypothetical imperatives. But this precisely isn't where the value of moral responsiveness lies, he claims: the value of moral responsiveness comes from responding to our obligations just on the basis of the fact that they *are* obligations, and not because in meeting those obligations we would be incurring some further benefit perceived in aligning our will to some externally identified norms. We act in accordance with the moral law out of duty, just for the sake that it is the moral law, and it is in this that moral worth resides (4: 397).

In the *Groundwork* the claim is different: if the moral law's essential nature *could* be known, this would only be because of one's being a subject incapable of deviation from a set of laws. In this scenario one's responsiveness to those laws would not have the character of instrumental reasoning but would rather lack any first-personal imperatival character at all. For such a being, one's will simply *does* of its own nature accord essentially with the laws of morality, and as such does not represent to itself the necessity that it *ought* to do so. The holy will, by virtue of its epistemic perfection, automatically follows laws of freedom in accordance with its very nature.⁴⁹ Transcendental idealism is supposed to leave room for sincere speculation that our epistemically hindered condition, as subjects belonging both to the world of sense and the intellectual world simultaneously (4: 451), might in fact be a condition granted to us so as to afford the capacity both of registering moral obligation and of the capacity to *fail* to respond to those obligations.⁵⁰ Only with both these capacities in place though can it be that

succeeding in living in accordance with moral values can be coherently construed as an activity that involves earning ‘worthiness to be happy’ (4: 450).⁵¹

The finite will needs autonomous self-legislation for the harmonizing of itself and the moral law. Rousseau claims that human beings are capable of having an ‘interest contrary to the general [i.e. natural] order’; furthermore, this capacity of ‘seeing’ that we have this potentially conflicting interest is sufficient for the human will to guide itself in regard to moral conduct. Kant’s claim is similar but stronger still: human reason’s embodied condition is ultimately one of the necessary conditions of its capacity to ‘take an interest’ in morality (4: 449). It does so not by aspiring to the conditions of knowing morality’s explanatory grounds – rather ‘we can explain nothing but what we can trace back to laws whose object can be given in some possible experience’ (4: 459). As in the *Theodicy* essay, here too ‘less depends on subtle reasoning than on sincerity in taking notice of the impotence of our reason’.⁵² The proper application of human beings’ reason in its ‘**practical extension**’ (Bxxx) is to the simple ‘objects’ given in ordinary possible experience, i.e. the ordinary moral scenarios that call for our response. The proper application of human beings’ practical reason thus involves its willingly restricting itself to the original intentional objects of our initial moral responses, namely, human beings and the varied circumstances in which they find themselves.⁵³

V. Conclusion

It is well-known that one of the motivations for Kant’s development of the idiosyncratic metaphysics of transcendental idealism was to allow for a particular benefit in his practical philosophy. Nor is it controversial to claim that Kant’s strategy frequently involves attempted mediations between or syntheses of different philosophical traditions.

The picture I have been suggesting is one that attempts to place the role of the holy will in the context of these views of Kant's methodological motives. The holy will affords a way of illustrating how the scholastic and humanist traditions can be mediated within the transcendental idealist framework. On the one hand, Kant can be understood as straightforwardly endorsing the ethics of freedom tradition. The sources of our moral obligations are laws of freedom, and the fullest realization of those laws would be the fullest realization of our moral duties. Furthermore, we can at least conceptualize how that fullest realization would manifest itself as an inability to do otherwise than follow the moral law. The holy will can then be recommended as an ideal of moral behaviour on which to model our practical aspirations.

Transcendental idealism's epistemology provides an account of how it is that such a full realization is nevertheless neither a possible nor even a conceptually coherent achievement for human beings. Furthermore, the epistemological limitations that the theory insists upon requires that the ultimate explanatory grounds for why we are restricted in this way are themselves beyond reach. While we can think that there is a noumenal holy will whose behaviour we ought to emulate, we cannot achieve that emulation of by way of mimicry of its cognized behaviour.⁵⁴ We must rather *hope* that we emulate that behaviour through our autonomous self-legislation of the moral law. As such, while the metaphysical picture of the ethics of freedom is retained, the epistemological route to its realization is that of the Enlightenment humanist tradition's recourse to the subject's own tribunal of reason. Were the holy will something that could be cognized, our attempts to co-ordinate our actions to its behaviour would constitute an act of mere conformity to the moral law. For Kant it is the very non-cognizable character of the holy will that ultimately preserves its relevance for our practical and existential concerns.⁵⁵

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¹ 4: 414, 4: 439. References to the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* are to (Kant 2012). References to Kant's other writings are to the Cambridge Edition series of Kant's works. Abbreviations used are as follows:

(A/B) – *Critique of Pure Reason*
 (CPrR) – *Critique of Practical Reason*
 (MM) – *Metaphysics of Morals*
 (Ethics) – *Lectures on Ethics*
 (Metaphysics) – *Lectures on Metaphysics*
 (Doctrine) – *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*.
 (ND) – *Nova Dilucidatio*
 (Notes) – *Notes and Fragments*
 (Observations) – *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*
 (Religion) – *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*
 (Remarks) – *Remarks in the 'Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime'*
 (Review) – *Review of Schulz's Attempt at introduction to a doctrine of morals for all human beings regardless of different religions*
 (Theodicy) – *On the Miscarriage of All Philosophy Trials in Theodicy*

² ('Prize essay on the basis of morality', 132, in Schopenhauer 2009, 135).

³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §628, p. 31.

⁴ E.g. (Allison 2011). Another possible function Allison proposes is that of accommodating a possible distinction between prescriptivity and normativity (Allison 2011, 275–6).

⁵ (Wood 2008).

⁶ (Willaschek 2006)

⁷ (Stern 2012).

⁸ The analysis here is restricted to the topic of the role of the holy will in the *Groundwork*. A systematic presentation of the relation of this account within the context of Kant's philosophy of religion, his later apparent anti-Pelagianism and mature philosophical view in the *Religion*, etc. is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁹ I don't attempt here to defend this conception here nor even discuss in detail whether this peculiar combination of scholastic and enlightenment elements is internally stable.

¹⁰ This is not to say that the phenomenological elements exhaust the meaning of necessitation. I think of necessitation here as reflecting the phenomenological manifestation of the metaphysically grounded necessity that the laws of freedom possess. I am grateful for an anonymous reviewer's stressing the importance of this qualification.

¹¹ (Stern 2012, 78).

¹² A488/B516. For discussion see (Pereboom 2006; Allison 1986; Allison 1990; Ameriks 1981)

¹³ I won't examine here the status of this claim or Kant's reasons for thinking it true. For discussion, see (Allison 2011) (Korsgaard 1996) and (Nelkin 2000).

¹⁴ I am here of course passing over a host of issues concerning the role of the so-called ‘deduction’ in *Groundwork* III, and what securing of morality (if any) it succeeds in providing. For sample discussions see (Ameriks 1981; Allison 1990; Allison 2011; Timmermann 2007).

¹⁵ In the *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion* in the 1780s Kant claims the demand of metaphysical communion with the divine as a necessary condition of knowledge of the noumenal realm:

Through experience we cognize only appearances, the *mundum phaenomenon* or *sensibilem*, but not the *mundum noumenon* or *intelligibilem*, not things as they are *in themselves*. This is shown in detail in the theory of being (ontology). God cognizes all things as they are in themselves *immediately* and *a priori* through an intuition of the understanding; for he is the being of all beings and every possibility has its ground in him. If we were to flatter ourselves that we cognize the *mundum noumenon*, then we would have to be in community with God so as to participate immediately in the divine ideas which are the authors of all things in themselves. *To expect this in the present life is the business of mystics and theosophists.* (*Doctrine*, 28: 1052)

¹⁶ As is now well established, Kant’s position does not require that every token obligation conflict with desire in order to count as a genuine moral response, contra Schiller’s complaint – for discussion see (Timmermann 2007). Yet I’d claim that Kant’s account does take the context of the *possible* conflict of obligation with desire as constitutive of the semantic content of the moral ‘ought’ (4: 413, 4: 449), though this topic is a larger one than can be explored here.

¹⁷ See also *CPrR* 5:79-84.

¹⁸ The claim is repeated elsewhere, such as in the *Religion* (6:64–6) and *Metaphysics of Morals* (*MM*, 6:446–7).

¹⁹ It could reasonably be objected that Kant’s view could not be one whereby we reject the holy will as a moral ideal since a holy will is in Kant’s own view an absolutely *good* will. As (Wood 1999) points out, the dutiful human will is a mere species of the genus of the good will, since the former is the good will under certain specific conditions of being hindered by sensibility (4: 397) and thus the category of moral goodness extends beyond that of the set of human wills (31). It is not my claim though that the holy will is not an exemplar of a ‘good’ will in some sense of that term; rather it is that the insofar as the goodness of the holy will is conceivable it is also one that we cannot contentfully conceive of as a practically relevant source of moral guidance.

²⁰ (Pink 2011).

²¹ See for example see (*De Coorrectione et Gratia*, 12:33 in Augustine 2010, 214) and (*Enchiridion*, Ch. XXVIII, para. 105, in Augustine 2006, 402).

²² (Lombard 1981 Book 2, Distinction 25, Ch. 4 463, quoted from Pink 2011, 548).

²³ *Ibid.* Cf. Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, Part I, Q. 62, Art. 8, and Anselm's *De libertate arbitrii*, I.

²⁴ (Leibniz 1997 Bk. II, Ch. XXI, 198).

²⁵ *Ibid.* The context makes it clear that this is a point where Leibniz's representative is in agreement. It is similarly claimed 'that God himself cannot choose what is not good; the freedom of the Almighty hinders not his being determined by what is best' (*ibid.*).

²⁶ For a discussion of Kant's perfectionism in ethics, see (Guyer 2011).

²⁷ (Duncan 2012, 986). Duncan further claims that '[i]f God could create a race of beings like this, they would not only be free, but in an important sense they would be more free than we are since they would act autonomously in many cases where we do not' (*ibid.*). As will be seen, there are good grounds I think to resist these claims.

²⁸ (Allison 2004, 28). Kant's rejection of theological ethics is well-known. As shall be seen, the rejection of a theocentric paradigm in moral explanation is an orthogonal issue.

²⁹ While I agree with Allison's emphasis on the rejection of theocentric paradigms within Kant's Critical philosophy, I don't see the presence of this element in Kant's thought as entailing a non-metaphysical reading of transcendental idealism. I can see no convincing reason why the anthropocentric/theocentric paradigm ought to be aligned to the non-metaphysical/metaphysical reading of transcendental idealism. For doubts regarding Allison's reading, see (Allais 2007; Guyer 1987; Hogan 2009)

³⁰ Bx/, A252/B308, A279/B335.

³¹ (Bacon 2000, 12). Cf. also *The Advancement of Learning* – Kant had access to both works – see (Warda 1922). Similarly, Kant claims in the Remarks that '[w]e cannot naturally be holy and we lost this through original sin, although we certainly can be morally good' (*Remarks*, 20: 15).

³² (Montaigne 2003, Bk. III, Ch. 13, "On Experience", 1268).

³³ (*Ibid.*, 1268-9). Similar claims can be found in various notes on the lectures on ethics, where Kant claims that 'all imitation of God is an affectation, a mere sham, which debases the worth of the Idea of God and is insulting to His majesty' (*Ethics*, 27: 723). See also *Ethics* 27: 322-3; 27: 333.

³⁴ (Rousseau 1979). For the influence of Rousseau upon Kant's development see (Cassirer 1983) (Kuehn 2001), (Velkley 2013) and (Quadrio 2009).

³⁵ For discussion, see (Velkley 2013; and various papers collected in Shell and Velkley 2012)

³⁶ (Rousseau 1979, 273ff.). The topics are just those identified by Kant at Bxxxxix-xxx.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 284.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 292.

³⁹ Cf. the *Lectures on Ethics*: 'God's nature as the law itself is incomprehensible to us, all that corresponds to it is obedience to His law....there can be no thought of any possible resemblance between man and God' (*Ethics*, 27: 723).

⁴⁰ (Chignell 2007) argues that the proper translation of *Glaube* in this context ought not to be automatically rendered as 'faith' though it can of course include religious belief.

⁴¹ The obvious reference here being to John's Gospel (John 20: 26-29).

⁴² *Bii.* References to the *Novum Organum* are to (Bacon, 2000). In what follows I hope merely to outline the historical plausibility of Kant's familiarity with the elements of the view that there is a value in resisting the aspiration to become a holy will, reflecting a recognition of the worth of both religious and moral *Glaube* that is itself made possible only as a consequence of our noumenal ignorance.

⁴³ (Bacon 2000, 8)

⁴⁴ (Bacon 2000, 10)

⁴⁵ (Bacon 2000, 12)

⁴⁶ (Bacon, 2000, 12).

⁴⁷ Freyenhagen's characterization of Kant's goal for transcendental idealism as that of having 'made room for freedom' (Freyenhagen 2008, 68) is particularly apt, since the aim in the *Groundwork* parallels the benefit of the first *Critique* in having 'made room' for religious *Glaube*.

⁴⁸ (O'Neill 1996, 281).

⁴⁹ Cf. Kant's Critical-period notes on metaphysics, where he claims that '[i]f we had complete insight into the nature of things, then nature and freedom, the determination of nature and the determination of ends, would be entirely identical. So it is with God; hence all ends in the world follow simultaneously from the essence of things and in an original being would be identical with his nature' (*Notes*, 18: 262).

⁵⁰ In one *Reflexion* Kant writes that '[i]t is splendid that on this earth the course of the world does not harmonize with moral laws, because otherwise no human being would himself know whether or not he acts from prudence or morality, and purely moral motives could not be felt' (R4111, *Notes*, 17: 420).

⁵¹ In the *Religion* too, Kant seems to endorse Haller's poetic right to say that this world is 'better than a realm of will-less angels' (*Religion*, 6: 65 – *note*). There Kant claims that we cannot but put the human being on a 'higher rung on the moral ladder' than the angels just again for the reason that the latter 'are raised above all possibility of being led astray'. Admittedly, Kant's point here is difficult to discern. Yet in the *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, Kant repeats the claim of the willlessness of angels again, emphasizing the special significance of morally correct behaviour by those imperfectly free agents who are capable of failing to live up to their God-given capacities but also capable of raising themselves 'above' the status of angels:

First, one must note that among the many creatures, the human being is the only one who has to work for his perfections and for the goodness of his character, producing them from within himself. God therefore gave him talents and capacities, but left it up to the human being how he would employ them. He created the human being free, but gave him also animal instincts; he gave the human being senses to be moderated and overcome

through the education of his understanding. Thus created, the human being was certainly perfect both in his nature and regarding his predispositions. But regarding their education he was still uncultivated. For this the human being had to have himself to thank, as much for the cultivation of his talents as for the benevolence of his will. Endowed with great capacities, but with the application of these capacities left to himself, such a creature must certainly be of significance. One can expect much of him; but on the other hand no less is to be feared. He can perhaps raise himself above a whole host of will-less angels but he may also degrade himself so that he sinks even beneath the irrational animals. (*Doctrine*, 28: 1077)

⁵² (*Theodicy*, 8: 267).

⁵³ Cf. A831/B859. In his handwritten remarks in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* that mark the impact of Rousseau's influence, Kant writes:

We can see other worlds in the distance, but gravity forces us to remain on the earth; we still can see other perfections of the spirits above us, but our nature forces us to remain human beings. (*Remarks*, 20: 153)

Though the remark obviously anticipates the 'starry heavens' conclusion of the second *Critique* (5: 161), here the tone is clearly one of warning against aspiring to the perfections of subjects of which we nevertheless can only have imperfect ideas; unlike our inquiries in physics, our moral aspirations are more sublime for the fact that they remain sublunary.

⁵⁴ Cf. Bxxvii – *note*.

⁵⁵ For comments and discussion I am grateful to: Angela Breitenbach, Clare Carlisle, Sasha Mudd, Tom Pink, Andrea Sangiovanni, Joe Saunders, Bob Stern, Martin Sticker, audiences at the King's College London, University of Southampton and University College Dublin, and an anonymous referee for this journal.